

Chapter Title: Bhakti

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Bhakti

The Sanskrit noun *bhakti*, derived from the verb *bhaj*—to share or to possess—occupies a semantic field that encapsulates notions of belonging, loyalty, loving, or even simply liking. It depicts an aspect of Indian religion in which the devotee's personal engagement with a divinity constitutes the core of religious life, and it has often been felt to be naturally constitutive of a community of sharing that draws people together in ways far deeper than the ordinary.

Bhakti of the strongly emotional type is usually said to have had its origins in early Tamil culture (ca. sixth to tenth century). Genuine continuities, such as the singing of devotional songs composed in vernacular language by 'poet-saints', the consideration of both sexes and all social strata as potential devotees, and the cultivation of personal experience in the face of any external pressures can be found in all geographical and historical stages of what has often been called the '*bhakti* movement'. Together, these characteristics form a considerable contrast to Vedic ritual traditions and the differential social distinctions that are often considered to lie at the core of Hindu religion.

Even if the ancient roots of *bhakti*, in contrast to those of Vedic practice, are difficult to establish, it would be a mistake to conclude that *bhakti* is necessarily a more recent phenomenon. Evidence gathered in early Buddhist and Jain texts suggests that many elements of *bhakti* existed in non-Vedic religions, and it is clearly to be found in the Bhagavadgita (ca. first century), which had its own quarrels with *Veda*. In the *Gita*, Krishna, speaking as Arjuna's mortal charioteer, states that he would accept the simplest offerings if they were presented to him in the spirit of *bhakti*. Interpreters disagree as to whether this statement implies the emotionalism of later *bhakti* or refers to a form of mental concentration of the sort we meet elsewhere in the *Gita*'s teaching. In the text overall, however, it is clear that *bhakti* is considered to constitute one of the three disciplines (*yoga*) constitutive of the seriously considered, well-lived life.

The *bhakti* of the Bhagavadgita stands at some distance from that of the early Tamil singer-saints. For the latter, *bhakti* is basic, even alimentary,

and never simply cerebral. The new tone that *bhakti* attains when devotion verges on possession leads to the creation of communities of those possessed—possessed through a musical, poetic idiom. In South India, the development of institutions to capture this sensibility is clearly traceable. One begins with the Alvars and Nayanars, Vaishnava and Shaiva poet-musicians respectively whose appeal to faith is direct. Later, their utterances became ritualized as features of temple worship. In time, the Sri Vaishnava community, dominated by Brahmans and Vellalas, comes to view the Alvars as its forebears, while the Shaiva Siddhanta community, led more exclusively by Vellalas, roots itself in the Nayanars. Anthological and hagiographical corpuses develop in both cases, and a body of theological reflection to match.

Although these Tamil Vaishnavite and Shaivite *bhakti* institutions were managed and administered by powerful Brahman and Vellala elites, the poets to whom these elites looked for inspiration were neither exclusively upper caste nor male. Accounts of the lives of the ‘humbler’ of these saints sometimes underline the point that their *bhakti* had the power to propel them ahead of members of the ‘purer’ castes. The fundamental institutions that developed in the aftermath of around the twelfth-century Virashaiva (‘extreme’ Shaiva) saints of Karnataka were even more strongly defined in these counterstructural terms. Hence, classically, the emblem (*linga*) of Shiva was to be recognized in one’s own body rather than in any institutionally acceptable temple or shrine.

The poet-saints of Maharashtra in western India come from a variety of social backgrounds, but again the inner freedom to serve God questions the validity of caste exclusivity. To read this as pure egalitarianism would usually not be right, but a Brahmin *bhakta* like Eknath (sixteenth century) is widely remembered and celebrated for his insistence on eating with ‘Untouchables’. Even so, those same Untouchables, as in the case of Chokhamela (date uncertain), are often remembered for having been denied entrance into the great temple of Vitthal (Vishnu), who is the common point of reference for the paradigmatic *bhaktas* of Maharashtra.

From the sixteenth century onwards, a certain number of references on the part of the *bhakti* poet-saints of North India to their predecessors elsewhere—notably the Bengali Jayadev (twelfth century) and the Maharashtrian Namdev (fourteenth century?)—testify to an interregional network of *bhakti* transmission. Yet, whether we can really think of this as giving evidence of a pan-Indian ‘*bhakti* movement’, said to begin in

the south in the Tamil region in the sixth century and to move beyond that region until it arrives in northern India in the fifteenth or sixteenth, remains a question. We must keep in mind that in its mature form, this 'bhakti movement' idea was a product of nationally motivated thinking in North India in the decades just preceding Independence. It may, therefore, be better to think of a *bhakti* network than a *bhakti* movement as a way to describe the thematic and stylistic similarities that characterize the mutually echoing *bhakti* poetry and hagiographical anthologies that emerge in many parts of India. If one prefers to retain the concept of 'movement', it may, similarly, be best to envision several parallel or interdependent *bhakti* streams rather than a single, common current. *Bhakti* anthologies, usually delimited by language, rarely display the strong transregional links and narrative coherence that go with our modern conception of a unified 'bhakti movement'.

Strictly speaking, the notion of a 'bhakti movement' first developed in English in the 1920s—in the works of J.N. Farquhar (1861–1929), Ishwari Prasad, and Tara Chand. Yet an argument can be made that it was Hazariprasad Dvivedi (1907–1979), writing across the linguistic divide in Hindi (in 1936, 1940, and 1942), who had the most enduring impact on the crystallization of the concept. For it was in the study and teaching of Hindi literature that the *bhakti* movement—in Hindi, *bhakti andolan*—received its widest, most devoted readership. All this was connected to the search for pan-Indian origins that would justify Hindi as a national language. If the south served as the foundation for a unifying *bhakti* history, then it was in the north that such a history first emerged.

Further reading: Grierson 1909; Hawley [forthcoming]; Lorenzen 2004; Novetzke 2008; Shukla 1940.

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